

Juvenile Firesetting Intervention Program



Welcome to the Juvenile Firesetter Intervention web site of the Utah Office of the State Fire Marshal. We thank you for joining us in attempting to reduce the juvenile firesetting problem in our state. The development of this material as a resource was made possible through a grant provided by the Utah Fire Prevention Board. The forms, curriculum, and other materials have been adapted from various programs across the country by the Utah Office of the State Fire Marshal. We encourage you to use these materials as a resource/reference to help to develop a juvenile firesetting program. If you have any questions, please contact us at:

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Mission

To identify the firesetting behavior of children involved in the unsanctioned and/or unsupervised use of fire, determine the motivation for the firesetting behavior, and provide appropriate education and/or referral for such children/families.

Problem

Each year in the United States, an estimated 700 children aged five and under die in home fires. Representing 20 percent of the fire deaths each year, this age group has a fire risk that is double the national average. Children playing with matches and lighters and other fire sources started about 91,810 fires per year from 1993 through 1997, which resulted in an estimated 338 deaths and 2,624 injuries each year. Preschool children are the most frequent victims of fires started by children playing with matches or lighters.” (The Development of an Education Program Effective in Reducing the Fire Deaths of Preschool Children: Children Sharon Gamache, National Fire Protection Association Center for High-Risk Outreach and Don Porth and Earl Diment, Portland, Oregon Fire and Rescue)

Overview

Children involved in fireplay can be classified into one of three basic categories: curiosity, reactionary, and extreme concern.

Curiosity is a term that means a child's firesetting will most likely be resolved through educational intervention. The child's firesetting behavior is typically a result of a lack of information about fire and its consequences.

Reactionary is a term describing the firesetting behavior as a reaction to some type of stress or crisis occurring in the life of the child and/or family. Educational intervention alone, while important, will not likely resolve the firesetting behavior. Some type of behavior modification is more often necessary. This need may require mental health intervention, medical treatment, parental intervention/training, or other such assistance.

Extreme Concern represents children who have an immediate need for some type of intervention beyond education. When a child presents a behavior profile that, coupled with the firesetting behavior, makes it appear likely that the firesetting behavior will continue before the family can access qualified assistance, they are categorized as **Extreme Concern** fire setting. Urgency is the key criteria for this category.

The intent of this program is to determine the motivation for the firesetting behavior and direct the child/family to the most appropriate intervention. The program consists of four basic components, which are: intake; interview/screening; intervention/education and follow-up/evaluation. To function effectively the program requires a manager, intervention specialist(s), and clerical help. These responsibilities may be accomplished by one person or by several people as part of other duties as assigned.

Intake

Intake is probably the easiest aspect of the program. Juveniles are identified and referred to the program by a variety of sources. These sources include but are not limited to: fire service, law enforcement, social services, medical community, mental health, juvenile justice, schools, and parents. When it is determined that a child has caused a fire, the referral process is triggered. An Intake Form (Appendix A) should include at a minimum: name, age, sex, date of birth, address, phone number, parent or caregiver name for each juvenile involved and a brief description of the incident or copy of incident report. This information should be confirmed with the parent or caregiver of the juvenile involved. This process can be done over the phone or in person and can take from ten to thirty minutes. The Intake Form will then be given to the program manager to establish a file for each child.

Interview/Screening

After the initial discussion with the family, a ninety-minute interview is usually scheduled with a trained intervention specialist. This interview should be confirmed by the mailing of a packet of information to the family. This packet includes a confirmation of the appointment time and date, a brochure describing the Child Firesetting and Juvenile Arson Intervention Program, a smoke alarm brochure, and some handouts describing fire survival skills and child behavioral tips. These items are included in Appendix B.

If a family refuses to participate, document what efforts that have been made in the file established for this juvenile. Then if the child is referred back to the Program again at a later date the prior refusal is now documented and a paper trail is established. This can tell a lot about the family's motivation for help.

An Interview Form (Appendix C) is used to guide the intervention specialist through the interview/screening process. During this process, education is also conducted. The interview forms the foundation for the intervention. This process is intended to help the interventionist determine the motivation behind the firesetting behavior and determine the ultimate needs of the child/family.

The goal of the intervention is to determine the child's motivation for the inappropriate fire use. For children whose motivation falls into the curiosity category, education is the most appropriate intervention. When children are identified as engaging in reactionary firesetting behaviors, the required intervention is probably beyond the limits of what the Child Firesetting and Juvenile Arson Intervention Program can offer. Extreme Concern Firesetters urgently need intervention beyond the scope of the Program.

For children with reactionary or extreme concern behaviors, the Program should assist the family in finding a program or agency best suited to the family's needs. This may range from inpatient hospitalization for the child, to family counseling. Parenting classes may be another recommended intervention plan. The program has established referral systems with mental health providers to facilitate services to families.

Obviously, when a family does not keep an appointment, an interview cannot be performed. In certain cases, the family never receives intervention for one of the following reasons: they refuse/decline; they fail to show up for their appointment; they are unable to be contacted.

Families will sometimes refuse to participate in the Program. The most common reason is denial, on the part of the family, that their child was involved in the firesetting activity. Some parents also claim that the incident was isolated and the discipline provided by the family will remedy the situation. In these cases, the family may be correct. However, the philosophy of the Child Firesetting and Juvenile Arson Intervention Program is that education will not harm the situation. It will most likely improve the understanding and emphasize of what the parents are trying to teach the children.

In some cases, the family fails to show up for the scheduled interview. This is most perplexing. At times, these families were the initiators of the impending intervention. A small number of parents may be making appointments with no intention of trying to make it to the interview. These parents may be scheduling appointments only out of a perceived legal obligation to do so. Most families that "no show" for an interview will fail to respond to rescheduling efforts. In other cases, the family is unable to be contacted. In some cases, they are displaced by the fire or possibly evicted as a result of the incident. A form letter should be sent to these families regardless of their movement. The mail should eventually catch up to them.

Education/Intervention

Education is the most critical part of the Child Firesetting and Juvenile Arson Intervention Program. When children have had an experience with fire, it is crucial that they gain an understanding of why their behavior was inappropriate. This involves pointing out their mistakes and identifying appropriate corrective action.

Many times, the parent may think they have offered direction to their child. The reality is that most have not. Parents visiting the program have usually attempted to educate their children about proper fire use by applying one or more of the following approaches:

- instilling fear in the child
- punitive measures only
- ignoring the problem, fearing ideas will be put into the child's head
- Explaining unrealistic outcomes of firesetting behavior (e.g. if you play with fire, you will be killed, you will go to jail, etc)

Rarely do parents, whose children experience problems with fire, give a detailed explanation of how and when fire should be used. This should be no surprise since many adults know little more than their children do about the realities of fire.

The Program provides fire safety education as an integral part of the interview/screening process. The interviewer begins by establishing a positive and friendly rapport with the family, particularly the child. Each interviewer is free to use his/her own education and rapport building techniques. Throughout the interview, messages about the proper use of matches and lighters are provided. The basic fire survival skills are also discussed (e.g. stop, drop and roll; crawl low in smoke, etc) but emphasis is placed on the understanding of appropriate use and rules about fire.

Visual aids such as still-photos, videotapes and personal experiences should be used with caution as part of the interview to depict the damaging effects of fire. Several different videos are available depending upon the child's age, level of concern, and mental developmental. A list of the videos and resources used in the Juvenile Firesetter Program is shown in Appendix D.

The parents are an important part of the educational process. If a parent cannot accompany the child to the interview, the interview should not be performed. Exceptions to mandatory parental attendance may be made in the case of children who are in the custody of the State and whose caseworker feels education will be beneficial to their future placement in a foster home or residential facility.

At the conclusion of the interview, the interviewer may assign some fire safety related responsibility to the child. Older children (10 years of age and over) may be assigned a homework assignment. The child may be asked to show

proof of completion or the parent may be given the responsibility to see that the assignment is completed. Occasionally, a "Non-Fire Use Contract" (see Appendix E) is established between the interventionist and the child.

If necessary, another meeting is scheduled to continue education.

The referral process primarily applies to the children whose needs fall beyond that which the Child Firesetting and Juvenile Arson Intervention Program can provide. These children typically require more than education to resolve the firesetting behavior.

Networking with potential referral sources is the first step in making a referral. Relationships with agencies and individuals, who can provide services for these families, must be sought out and developed in advance so both the fire service and the referral agency have the utmost confidence in one another.

Referrals are typically made by phone. At times, the referral agency will request information in writing. When a referral is necessary, a "Consent for Release of Information" form is filled out by the family (see Appendix F). This form allows the program manager to communicate with the person or agency listed by the child's parent. Typical referral agencies are:

- Mental health professional
- Child protective services
- School counselor
- In-patient hospitalization
- Physician for medical evaluation
- Parenting classes (for parents)
- Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) screening
- Juvenile justice authorities
- Attorneys

Once a referral is made, the Child Firesetting and Juvenile Arson Intervention Program becomes a resource to the service provider who is working with the child and family over the long term. The Program cooperates with, and encourages this approach.

Follow-Up/Evaluation

Follow-up and evaluation is probably the most important aspect of the Child Firesetting and Juvenile Arson Intervention Program. A good program will employ a comprehensive follow-up component that not only questions recidivism, but also critiques its content and delivery. This follow-up can be used as a compass to guide future changes to the Program. A sample of the follow-up form can be found in Appendix H. Follow-up is performed four to six months post-interview. The follow-up can be done by telephone or mail.

Proaction

The final element of the Program completes the circle of education. The information gained about child firesetting behaviors is used to target the same audience in a proactive, educational manner. This is the only way to actually prevent firesetting behaviors from occurring (the program alone only prevents repeat behavior).